

THE RUBICON OF THE SANGH PARIVAR

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A couple of months ago Shri L K Advani visited Pakistan and the statements he made there, especially those pertaining to the Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, aroused much controversy, especially amongst the Sangh Parivar. It is well established that he has been quoted out of context and the meaning of the words used has been twisted, misconstrued and misused by his opponents. Nevertheless a time has now come in Indian politics when the **Sangh Parivar and its political manifestation, BJP**, has arrived at the banks of the River Rubicon, which it must cross to give battle to its opponents or from where it must retreat to pass into oblivion. The question is whether the party and the Parivar will muster the courage to cross this hurdle.

Let us begin with the basics. The mother institution of all the constituents of the Sangh Parivar is the RSS, which claims that it is not a political party and has no interest in politics. Despite this **it has a controlling stake in the political manifestation of the Parivar, BJP, to the extent of trying to dictate who will be the President of the party.** RSS must now ask itself whether, in its self proclaimed role of being a social reformer, it should dictate terms to BJP. This means that either RSS should openly enter the world of politics or it should completely keep out of organizational matters concerning BJP. By interfering without accepting responsibility RSS is severely restricting the room for manoeuvre, which a political party must enjoy in order to be competitive.

A second dilemma before the Sangh Parivar is the extent to which Hindutva can be converted to a political concept and be introduced as a factor in electoral politics. For this purpose RSS has to first define what it means by Hindutva in much more precise terms than saying that it is a cultural rather than a religious precept. The fact is that the minorities consider Hindutva to be a means of promoting militant Hinduism at their cost, giving rise to fears about their safety and security. The Sangh Parivar must realize that Hinduism is a much stronger religion than the Parivar thinks, which means that it can afford to remain without dogma and it can best prosper in an environment in which there is no bigotry. Come to think of it, the word Hindu is not to be found in our scriptures, certainly not the Vedas, because the word itself has come from how the Arabs referred to Indians. The very catholicity of Hinduism is what gives it strength and the diversity within the Hindu fold is what makes it virtually impregnable.

Let me illustrate. Shaivites and Vaishnavites are both Hindus, with both worshipping a different manifestation of the Hindu Trinity, Shiva and Vishnu. The Vaishnavite Iyengars and the Shaivite Iyers in the South apply their caste marks differently on their foreheads, one vertically and the other horizontally. This visible difference even of symbols denotes the diversity in the religion, but the worship of the same Parmeshwar by both with the objective of achieving moksh unites them in the Hindu fold. Unlike Islam, where the Shias and Sunnis are often at war, unlike Christianity where **schisms between the Church of Rome and the Protestants** have often led to mass violence, the various sects of Hindus have lived happily within the same fold. This is what makes Hinduism an almost indestructible religion. What is the VHP trying to do? It is trying to force Hinduism into a mould of bigotry which, far from spreading the cult of Ram throughout the country, endangers the religion itself. In any case the political exploitation of caste has now reached a stage where one can hardly speak of a united Hindu people. Mayawati has her own caste agenda, Mulayam Singh has run away with other sections of Hindus and Lalu's appeal is to yet another segment of Hindu society. In Tamil Nadu over a long period of time caste equations tend to govern the politics of that state. Within Hindu society itself the divide between the upper castes and the lower castes, the Brahman/Rajput and

the Shudras so to speak, has created such social and economic discrimination within the community that certainly the lower castes no longer consider themselves bound by Hindu orthodoxy. To which Hindus is the concept of Hindutva addressed? Unless the Sangh Parivar is once again able to bring Hindu society together in an environment of equality, tolerance and liberalism one sees very little hope for the Hindus and certainly no chance whatsoever for even the cultural content of Hindutva to take root and prosper.

This leads us to the political question. The core of the Hindu appeal was the Hindi speaking states, with UP and Bihar predominating because of the size of their population. Here caste has overtaken religion so that even if the Sangh Parivar were to make an outright religious appeal for votes it just would not work. In states such as MP and Rajasthan there is a long tradition of BJP and Congress alternating in power and here both the parties appeal to the same electorate not on grounds of religion but on grounds of performance. Eastern India, especially West Bengal, has very little BJP presence and in the South BJP is virtually non-existent as a political party which counts. In Gujarat and Maharashtra BJP does have a presence and in Gujarat there does seem to be a communal divide. How long this will last is anyone's guess but my own feeling is that the politics of communalism is a temporary phenomenon, especially because Gujarat does have a long history of supporting the Congress. If the BJP is to come to power it obviously cannot do so on its own because the arithmetic of votes does not work in its favour. It needs allies who have strong regional roots with whose assistance BJP can revive the old NDA magic. The strength of Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee lay in his ability to convince the BJP allies that the party was one of moderation and the allies need not abandon their regional or secular agenda merely because they support BJP. Obviously a BJP which opts for the kind of militancy which the Sangh Parivar advocates will drive these allies away and militancy of the VHP – Bajrang Dal model would be suicidal. In order to make a mark in the politics of India as it is today the BJP has to present itself as a party of moderation.

It has to do more. It has to emerge as a party of reforms, reform of society, reform of religion, reform of the economy, reform of the administrative structures of this country, reform of its own attitude towards politics. Only a party which can cleanse Hinduism of its social aberrations, assure the minorities about their place in the Indian sun, without any hint of appeasement, restore law and order, which includes elimination of communal riots, rejuvenate the economy, modernize education, bring hope to rural India and create new employment opportunities can develop that appeal to all Indians which would make them vote for it across the board. This move away from what the BBC calls a Hindu Nationalist Party into one which has a universal appeal is that shore of the Rubicon which the party must cross if it is to aspire for national power. Perhaps this is the message that Shri L K Advani has been trying to convey. India is a country that neither trishul, nor cross, nor crescent and moon can dominate. It is a country in which Hindu traditions and Sufi spirituality have softened the contours of Islam away from their harsh Wahabi origins, which ecumenism has made the church more away from orthodoxy, in which Hinduism itself has absorbed a great deal of Rahim and Christ the teacher. This country cries for tolerance, acceptance, inclusion and not for bigotry and exclusion. The struggle for the establishment of a fraternal society is our real challenge. The question remains whether the Sangh Parivar has the courage to cross this Rubicon and conquer Rome.
